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NDEA ENGLISH INSTITUTES--COMPOSITION.

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TEACHER-PARTICIPANTS IN A WORKSHOP OF THE 1965 NDEA ENGLISH INSTITUTE AT CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY RECOGNIZED COMPOSITION AS THE MOST PROBLEMATIC AREA OF ENGLISH TEACHING. THEY IDENTIFIED LACK OF THOROUGH PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION IN TEACHING COMPOSITION AS THE PRIMARY REASON FOR ITS RELATIVE NEGLECT BY TEACHERS. HIGH STUDENT-TEACHER RATIO, MULTIPLE-CLASS PREPARATIONS, AND INSUFFICIENT RELEASED TIME WERE CONSIDERED TO BE GOOD AND VALID, BUT SECONDARY, REASONS FOR THE NEGLECT OF COMPOSITION. A SERIES OF INSERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMS WAS PROPOSED AS A MAJOR SOLUTION FOR TEACHER PREPARATION DEFICIENCIES, AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WERE DEVELOPED FOR FOUR SUCH PROGRAMS--SEQUENTIAL COMPOSITION, THEME EVALUATION, THEME ASSIGNMENT, AND THE VALUE OF HIGH SCHOOL COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION AS INTERPRETED BY FORMER STUDENTS. ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIRMEN WERE URGED TO TRY TO ELIMINATE TEACHING CONDITIONS WHICH INTERFERE WITH EFFECTIVE COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION. MEANWHILE, THE PROPOSAL SUGGESTED, INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS MIGHT TRY SUCH TECHNIQUES AS MULTIPLE-STUDENT-CRITIQUING OF THEMES, RECORDING COMMENTS ON TAPE RATHER THAN WRITING THEM ON THE PAPERS, AND CRITICIZING ONLY ONE WRITING ASPECT PER SET OF THEMES. (THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (RD)

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NDEA ENGLISH INSTITUTES: COMPOSITION

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For too long, composition has been the "step-child" of the English teacher. We all know good and valid reasons to explain why this is so: too many pupils per teacher, too many preparations, and too little released time during the school day. These reasons come quickly. But might there be another reason?

During the NDEA English Institute which I attended at Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, during the summer of 1965, the participants were motivated to think about the problems with composition and to come up with solutions. The workshop connected with the institute provided us with the opportunity for free exchange of ideas. We all recognized that composition was the most problemed area of English teaching, not just because of the reasons usually given, but primarily because we, as English teachers, were not thoroughly prepared to teach composition. In most cases, the English teacher has only had the required freshmen composition classes for his professional preparation. The other

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reasons, valid though they are, are usually secondary.

Therefore, the participants felt that teacher preparation was the area for prime concern. In-service training programs were created; and, with special appreciation to Mrs. Martha A. Strawbridge of Sturgis High School, Sturgis, Michigan, I would like to present the four different programs her committee developed.

PROGRAM 1: Sequential Composition

Questions to be considered:

1. Can specific skills be divided among various educational levels to develop sequential writing skills?
2. Can we assume that certain items have been taught in the elementary grades and in junior high?
3. If individual items are emphasized at certain grade levels, what items should be introduced at what grade?
4. How can these items be introduced?
5. How much writing can we require at each level?
6. How can we use the accumulative file for student writing? (An accumulative file sample may be obtained from the Sturgis High School, Sturgis, Michigan.)

PROGRAM 2: Evaluating a Theme

Questions to be considered:

1. How can we account for indivudual differences in the grading of themes?
   a. Mimeograph three student themes.
   b. Have members of the department grade each theme.
   c. Compare grades.
   d. Analyze grades and reactions.
2. What emphasis should be placed on mechanics?
3. Should we fail a paper on mechanics?
4. What emphasis should be placed on content?
5. Should we fail a mechanically perfect paper that lacks thoughtfulness?
6. Should we give two grades?
7. Should we grade all papers?
8. How much recapitulation should we provide the class?
9. What shall we consider under levels of usage?
10. How can we encourage creativity?

PROGRAM 3: Assigning a Theme

Questions to be considered:

1. How do we choose a topic?
2. How can we motivate?
3. How much writing should be creative? How much should be expository?
4. Should we teach the research paper?
5. What is the purpose of the research paper?

6. How can we avoid plagiarism?
7. Should composition be taught with literature or as a separate subject?
8. What basic writing skills can be taught remedial or slow learners?
9. How can we best develop logic?
10. How can we use cartoons as topics?
11. How can we use statistics as topics?
12. What are the advisable lengths of papers?
13. What kinds of writings shall there be? Expository, Descriptive, Narrative, Argumentative? When shall these be introduced?

PROGRAM 4: What Composition in High School Did For Me, as interpreted by returning college freshman.

Procedure: Four or five high school graduates who are now attending college or holding down responsible jobs should be invited to participate in this panel. Seniors who have attended Writing Workshops the proceeding summer might be included.

Questions to be considered:

1. Where was the emphasis in high school, on creative or on expository writing?
2. What were your favorite topics? Why?
3. Was writing based on literature? Always? Sometimes?
4. What was the average length of assignments?
5. How were your assignments evaluated?

6. Did you feel that you were well prepared for college or career?
7. If so, how? If not, why not?
8. What was the rapport between students and faculty?
9. How was this rapport good? Was it effective? How?
10. What were the major English problems you faced in beginning college English? In beginning a career?
11. What can our school do for college-prep people that it has not been doing?
12. What suggestions would you make to help us improve our English program?

It was felt that such a series of in-service programs would go a long way toward solving the teacher-preparation problem.

But what about those good and valid, though secondary causes: too many pupils per teacher, too many preparations, and too little released time during the school day? These have continued to trouble me. Along with many of the other English Department Chairmen that attended the NDEA institute, I feel that it is the responsibility of the chairman to keep working at eliminating these poor teaching situations within his school system. But what can we English teachers do in the meantime?

Here are some of the techniques I have successfully employed.

In one method, a large class is sub-divided into small groups of approximately five students. Then, after careful preparation in the methods of critiquing, these students evaluate five other student themes, each theme being critiqued by each of the five students. This procedure has a double value. It helps me in my evaluation of the themes, and it helps develop critical powers in my students.

Another method I have used and one that is well liked by my students is evaluating a set of themes with an audio tape recorder. Rather than my usual method of first scanning the themes and then carefully re-reading with red pencil in hand, I turn on the tape recorder and read the first paper, making appropriate comments where needed and a final evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses demonstrated. After a brief pause, I proceed to the next paper, notating the appropriate measurement number of the tape on each paper. This makes it very easy for each student to find the evaluation of his paper. This process takes me less time, in some ways is more thorough, and puts the main emphasis on the quality of ideas presented rather than on the form.

An additional method that I have found of some value, is criticizing a set of themes on only one aspect of writing. For example, I may specify that I will be looking for thorough development of ideas; and, therefore, it is this one aspect that I will be grading. This has an additional value in that I can select an area where the students have demonstrated a weakness in previous papers.

In conclusion, I would emphasize that the NDEA English Institute was of great value to me: it made me aware of latest events in the field of English; it gave me a chance to voice my problems and come to some solutions; it made me think; and it made me act. In this sense, it was a great motivator.